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Demographic clouds on China's horizon

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Abstract:
China's sparse birth rate and its "one child" policy may cause more daunting, problems in the decades ahead. China's demographic condition, including the rapid aging of its population, and declining manpower are discussed.

Full Text:

With there is little about China's position in the year 25 that we can predict with confidence, one critical aspect of China's future can be described today with some accuracy: her population trends. Most of the Chinese who will be alive in 2025, after all, have already been born.

The most striking demographic condition in China today is the country's sparse birth rate. Though most of the population still subsists at Third World levels of income and education, fertility levels are remarkably low-below the level necessary for long-term population replacement, in fact. This circumstance of course relates to the notorious "One Child" policy of China's Communist government, applied with varying degrees of force for nearly two decades.

Ironically, by laboring so ferociously to avoid one set of "population problems"-namely, "overpopulation"-Beijing has helped to ensure that another, even more daunting set of problems will emerge in the decades ahead. Those population problems will be, for Beijing and for the world, utterly without precedent. While impossible to predict their impact with precision, they will impede economic growth, exacerbate social tensions, and complicate the Chinese government's quest to enhance its national power and security.

How can we know fairly well what China's demography will look like 25 years from now? Because according to the latest estimates by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, about a billion of the 1.2 billion Chinese living on the mainland today will still be alive in 2025accounting for about seven out of every ten of the 1.4 billion Chinese then alive.

The main population wildcard in China's future is fertility. The Census Bureau suggests that the nation's total fertility rate (TFR) now averages a bit under 1.8 births per woman per lifetime (significantly below the 2.1 births necessary for long-term population stability). For broad portions of the Chinese populace, fertility appears to be even lower-as depressed as 1.3 lifetime children per woman in some cities. In Beijing and Shanghai, TFRS may actually have fallen under one by 1995!

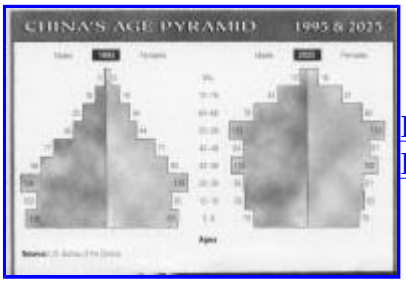
The Census Bureau assumes Chinese fertility will average about 1.8 births per woman through 2025. But today's childbearing takes place under the shadow of the country's severeand coercive-anti-child campaign. Might not the birth rate leap up if that program were discarded or reversed? It's impossible to be sure, but bits of evidence suggest that a revolution in attitudes about family size has swept China since Mao's deathand that this would prevent fertility from surging back toward more traditional patterns, even if all governmental controls were relaxed. Consequently, the Bureau projects that China will be reaching zero population 25 years from now.

But China's population will look quite different than it does today as the nearby chart reveals. China in 2025 will have fewer children: The population under 15 years of age is projected to be almost 25 percent smaller than today. The number of people in their late twenties may drop nearly 30 percent. But persons in their late fifties stand to swell in number by over 150 percent, and there will be more people between the ages of 55 and 59 than in any other five-year age span. Persons 65 years or older are likely to increase at almost 3.5 percent a year between now and 2025, accounting for over three-fifths of the country's population growth.

In short, if Census Bureau projections prove correct, China's age structure is about to shift radically from the "Christmas tree" shape so familiar among contemporary populations to something more like the inverted Christmas trees we see out for collection after the holidays. While in 1997 there were about 80 Chinese age 65 or older for every 100 children under age five, by 2025 China would have more than 250 elderly for every 100 preschoolers.

China's coming demographic transformation will bring three sets of serious social problems: rapid aging, declining manpower, and a protracted bride shortage.

China's "graying" will be as swift as any in history. In 1995, the median age in China was just over 27 years. By 2025 it will be about 40.



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CHINA'S AGE PYRAMID

Although several European nations are already at China's 2025 median age, they got there much more slowly, and with much more societal wealth available to cushion the effects. A similar "graying" over the last four decades in Japan has emerged as an intense concern of Tokyo policymakers, who wonder how the nation is going to manage its growing burden of pensioners. Like the China of 2025, Japan's median age is currently around 40 years. But Japan is vastly richer today than China could hope to be by 2025. Even if its current brisk pace of economic progress continues, China will still be by far the poorest country ever to cope with the sort of old-age burden it will face.

For despite its recent progress, **China** remains a land of daunting **economic** disparities and crushing poverty. World Bank research has indicated that the proportion of Chinese suffering "absolute poverty" (defined by the Bank as living on less than $1 a day) was nearly 30 percent from 1981-95. Though that

figure is undoubtedly lower today, under almost any plausible scenario for **future** income **growth**, **China** in 2025 will still have hundreds of millions of people with incomes not much different from today's average ones-but with a dramatically older population.

How will such a nation care for its elderly? Under current arrangements, the only social security system for most of the country's poor is their family. Scarcely any public or private pension funds operate in the remote rural areas where the overwhelming bulk of China's poor reside. In 2025, grandparents will by and large be the parents of the "One Child" era, so they will have few offspring to offer them shelter in old age. A small but significant group will have no surviving children. A fourth or more could have no surviving sons-thus finding themselves, under Chinese culture, in the unenviable position of depending on the largesse of their son-in-law's household, or, worse, competing for family resources against their son-in-law's parents.

Problem two will be declining manpower. Over the past generation, China's brisk economic growth has been partly due to an extraordinary increase in the work force. From 1975 to 1995, China's "working-age population" grew by over 50 percent (or nearly 300 million persons). In a final burst due to population increase, it will grow by over 12 million persons a year at the beginning of the 2000's. Then the growth of potential workers will abruptly brake. By around 2015, China's workingage group will have peaked at just under 1 billion. In 2025, it is projected to be about 10 million persons smaller than a decade earlier. Thereafter, the decline may accelerate, with the workforce shrinking by as many 70 million people over 15 years.

Having fewer workers may complicate China's quest for economic growth. Younger people tend to be better educated than their elders, and as they stream into a work force this increases its average skill. But China's demographic trends will slow down the improvement in education and skill-levels among the working-age population. Today, the rising cohort of 10- to 14-year-olds represents roughly a seventh of the country's working-age population. By 2015 it will be only a twelfth. This presages a sharp slowdown of education-based improvements in labor productivity.

China will not be the first country in the world to wrestle with an aging populace, or a shrinking workforce. But China's third major demographic challenge is unprecedented: a coming imbalance between men and women of marriageable age.

Beginning with the advent of the nation's "One Child" policy, Chinese sex ratios began a steady, and eerie, rise. By 1995, a Chinese sample census counted over 118 boys under the age of five for every 100 little girls. Part of this imbalance is a statistical artifact-the combination of strict government birth quotas and the strong Chinese preference for sons has caused some parents to hide or "undercount" their newborn daughters, so that they might try again for a boy. But the larger portion of the reported imbalance appears to be real-the consequence of sex-selective abortion and, to a lesser extent, female infanticide.

This tragic imbalance between boys and girls will mean a corresponding mismatch of prospective husbands and brides two decades hence. By Chinese tradition, virtually everyone able to marry does. But the arithmetic of these unnatural sex imbalances is unforgiving, implying that approximately one out of every six of the young men in this cohort must find a bride from outside of his age group-or fail to continue his family line.

In China's past, any problem of "excess" males was generally solved by the practice of marrying a younger bride, which worked well when each new generation was larger than the one before. But with

today's low fertility, each new generation in China will typically be smaller than the one before. So if young men try to solve their marriage problem by pairing off with a younger woman, they will only intensify the "marriage crisis" facing men a few years their junior. Nor will searching abroad for a Chinese wife be very promising: By 2020, the surplus of China's twentysomething males will likely exceed the entire female population of Taiwan!

In early modern Europe, bachelorhood was an acceptable social role, and the incidence of never-married men was fairly high. In China, however, there is no such tradition. Unless it's swept by a truly radical change in cultural attitudes toward marriage over the next two decades, China is poised to experience an increasingly intense, perhaps desperate, competition among young men for the nation's limited supply of brides.

A 1997 essay in the journal Beijing Luntan predicted direly that "such sexual crimes as forced marriages, girls stolen for wives, bigamy, visiting prostitutes, rape, adultery...homosexuality...and weird sexual habits appear to be unavoidable." Though that sounds overly dramatic, the coming bride shortage is likely to create extraordinary social strains. A significant fraction of China's young men will have to be re-socialized to accept the idea of never marrying and forming their own family. That happens to be a condition in which men often exhibit elevated rates of crime and violence.

Many of China's young men may then be struck by a bitter irony: At a time when (in all likelihood) their country's wealth and power is greater than ever before, their own chances of establishing a family and comfortable future will look poor and worsening. Such a paradox could invite widespread disenchantment.

There is little any future Chinese government will be able to do to address this problem. China's involuntary bachelors will simply have to "handle punishment they have received as a result of...the mistakes of the previous generation," suggests the Beijing Luntan. How they will accept this remains to be seenand it will bear directly on the character and behavior of the China that awaits us.

[Author note]

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